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SUBJECT: NEW DEFENSE MINISTER SAYS DEFINING COMMON INTEREST  
IS KEY TO STRONGER ALLIANCE

Classified By: AMB. ALEXANDER VERSHBOW. REASONS 1.4 (b/d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador held his first official meeting on March 7 with Lee Sang-hee, the new ROK Minister of National Defense. They engaged in a one-hour discussion that focused on the strategic importance and future role of the U.S.-ROK Alliance.

-- The Ambassador congratulated Minister Lee on his appointment and praised his extensive military and policy credentials.

-- Minister Lee related that he had just spoken by telephone with Secretary Gates and that they had agreed it was important to utilize the U.S.-ROK presidential summit in April to highlight that the alliance has an important role to play in the future security of the region.

-- Lee conveyed his own view that the alliance must transcend the North Korea issue to focus on regional security concerns and further contribute to world peace.

-- The Ambassador stressed that the USG considers global transformation of its military posture to be a key defense priority and asked for Minister Lee's full support for the changes that impact U.S. Forces Korea. He voiced the U.S. desire to work with the ROK to expand the role of the alliance in addressing regional and global security concerns.

-- Minister Lee stressed the importance to the alliance of developing a common set of interests, saying that if the two presidents can voice a clear consensus the alliance will truly stand strong.

-- Lee said many failed to realize that the U.S. presence in Korea should be permanent and pointed out that the stable stationing of U.S. forces on the peninsula would be important to implementing our future bilateral security strategy. He advised the U.S. utilize its presence in Korea to check the rise of China while managing Japan as well.

-- The Minister proposed resurrecting the Big 4 dialogue between the Ambassador, the USFK Commander, the MOFAT Minister and the Minister of National Defense.

-- In a side discussion, Lee clearly stated that the ROKG position on the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) was that it should move forward as agreed while the U.S. and ROK would continue to carefully assess progress on implementation and the security situation. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On March 7, the Ambassador paid his first office call on Lee Sang-hee, the new ROK Minister of National Defense. The two engaged in an hour-long discussion that focused on the strategic importance and future role of the U.S.-ROK Alliance. The Ambassador congratulated Lee who had assumed his new cabinet position one week earlier and welcomed him back to a leading role in formulating U.S.-ROK security policy. Lee recalled their previous meetings when he was ROK Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and said he had attended a speech the Ambassador had given at SAIS in Washington. The Ambassador praised Lee's extensive military and policy credentials, commenting that he thought the alliance was in very good hands. Lee modestly replied that while he was very familiar with aspects of alliance management, he was only partially acquainted with other newer developments, and was still in the process of determining the direction of the new ROK administration.

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TELCON WITH SECRETARY GATES  
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13. (C) Minister Lee told the Ambassador that he had spoken by telephone earlier in the morning with Secretary of Defense Gates. He said they had agreed on utilizing the April U.S.-ROK presidential summit to highlight the fact that the alliance has an important role to play in the security of the region -- a role that will be as vital in the future as it

has been in the past. Lee conveyed his view that the alliance must transcend the North Korea issue to focus on regional security concerns and to contribute further to world peace. He said he had explained to Secretary Gates that he would be unable to accompany President Lee Myung-bak to Camp David for the summit owing to a security practice that does not allow both the commander-in-chief and defense minister to be outside the country at the same time. However, he said he hoped to visit Washington soon after to meet with the SECDEF and continue their discussion in more depth.

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ALLIANCE TRANSFORMATION: FORWARD HO!  
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14. (C) The Ambassador began by stressing that the U.S. Government considers its worldwide transformation under the Global Posture Review to be a key defense priority, and that the transformation of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) was an important part of that. He noted that a good start had been made on implementing alliance transformation through the Yongsan Relocation Plan and Land Partnership Plan together with the transfer of additional military responsibilities to the ROK. He asked that Minister Lee firmly support their completion.

15. (S) NOTE: In a brief side discussion after their formal meeting had ended, Lee stated that the ROKG position on the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) was as he had stated in his confirmation hearing: that it should continue to move forward, as agreed, to execution of the transfer on April 17, 2012, while the U.S. and ROK would continue to assess progress on implementation and the security situation along the way. The Ambassador thanked him, noting that his statement reflected the U.S. position as well. END NOTE.

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VISION OF AN EXPANDED GLOBAL ROLE  
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16. (C) The Ambassador went on to stress the U.S. desire to work with the ROK to define and expand the global role of the alliance in addressing other regional and global security

concerns, and to advocate a continued U.S. security presence on the Korean Peninsula beyond the peaceful settlement of hostilities with the DPRK. During the comprehensive discussion that followed, Minister Lee echoed the importance of envisioning the future of the Korean Peninsula and developing a common bilateral understanding of how the alliance could continue to advance our shared interests. We should work to upgrade the alliance from one that is military in nature to one that transcends that by adopting a more strategic approach for achieving our mutual interest, Lee urged. He said he expected that our two presidents would focus on U.S.-ROK common interests during their April summit meeting. He added that if the two leaders voice a clear consensus about our common interests to our respective publics and legislatures, the alliance will truly stand strong. History has taught us that narrow interests only lead to tension and discord, Lee said. Defining our common interests is the key to a strong alliance because the pursuit of mutual interests builds trust and trust is the foundation from which we can better pursue our common goals.

17. (C) Minister Lee and the Ambassador agreed that both the American and Korean publics held widely varying views of the reality of Korea today and the role of the alliance both now and in the future. Some still regarded Korea as it was during the Korean War. Others still see things as they were ten or twenty years ago. The better informed understand the situation as it truly is today. Because there is such a multitude of perceptions, it is important that we educate our publics so that we can see each other as we truly are, Lee said. He and the Ambassador agreed that it would be important to the well-being of the alliance to foster a clearer public understanding of its broader mission. They both pointed to the April summit meeting at Camp David as an excellent opportunity to talk about our common interests, highlight our shared values, and reacquaint our publics with

the great importance of the alliance, while also helping them see that the U.S. security presence on the Korean Peninsula has long-term value beyond simply deterring the North Korean threat.

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SUMMIT DECLARATION  
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18. (C) Reflecting previous high-level U.S.-ROK discussions, the Ambassador recommended a general alliance vision statement be developed for the April summit (to encompass economic and people-to-people cooperation as well as defense links) which Minister Lee could then follow up on in more detail when he meets with Secretary Gates later in the spring. Lee agreed, saying he thought it was important that the summit establish a future framework for the overall U.S.-ROK relationship that would guide our two governments regardless of future changes in U.S. or ROK administrations.

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STRATEGIC DISCUSSION  
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19. (C) Minister Lee related that he had talked with many Americans during the time he spent in the United States, last year, and he had found that the strategic importance of the Korean Peninsula was not fully understood. He believed that the continuation of both Northeast Asian alliances - U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK - was necessary to maintain and further enhance the security of the region. He thought the United States was most concerned about the rise of China, but that Washington tended to view Northeast Asia only in terms of Japan and China, while ignoring the importance of maintaining a permanent U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula. He said many Americans failed to realize that the U.S. presence in Korea should be permanent and cautioned against those who sought to pit Japan against China, saying that would be harmful to the region. It would be wiser for the United States to utilize its presence on the Korean Peninsula to check the rise of China while managing Japan as

well, Lee continued. For the same reason, he felt that if Korea were to be reunified, the importance of the U.S. presence would actually increase exponentially. This logic was based on an understanding that the USG had a vested interest in peace and stability in the region and would continue to foster that outcome by serving as a balancing power in the region, Lee explained.

¶10. (C) The Ambassador agreed that the U.S. presence in the Korean Peninsula played an important role in helping to maintain equilibrium in the region as China rises and Japan becomes more of a normal power. He agreed that the ROK-U.S. alliance and the U.S. troop presence were underappreciated and suggested that the start of a new Korean administration offered an opportunity for the U.S. and ROK to think more about the longer-term mission of the alliance. We were glad to have Minister Lee as a committed partner in that discussion. Lee acknowledged that the stable stationing of U.S. forces in Korea would be important to implementing our future bilateral security strategy. Indicating that he appreciated the importance to the USG of completing its global military transformation, Lee pointed out that the ROK was aiding that effort through YRP and LPP by creating an atmosphere that would encourage the stable positioning of U.S. forces for the future. To that end, he said he thought that USFK Commander General B.B. Bell's push for normalization of tours of duty for U.S. servicemembers (from one-year unaccompanied tours to three-year tours with families) was an excellent idea. The Ambassador thanked Minister Lee for his support, commenting that he and General Bell would welcome his assistance in educating those in our Congress who remain unconvinced.

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CALL TO RECONVENE THE BIG FOUR  
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¶11. (C) Minister Lee recalled the usefulness of the 2-plus-2 or Big 4 dialogue of the past (which included the Ambassador, USFK Commander, MOFAT Minister and MND Minister) and proposed that they be reinstituted. The ambassador said he supported the idea, at least on an ad hoc basis, and offered to host the first one at his residence, but asked if Lee had discussed it with Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan. Lee replied that he had yet to do so but that he intended to talk to him about it very soon.

¶12. (C) NOTE: Lee may find that a hard sell as high-level MOFAT contacts have told us that they oppose the meetings because, while they were appropriate in times of heightened tension with the North, it would not be particularly useful to reestablish them today. END NOTE.

¶13. (C) The Ambassador suggested that if such a meeting were held it might be appropriate to use it as a means of brainstorming on the future evolution of the alliance, as well as providing a means to coordinate our respective public affairs messages about alliance issues.

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SWAPPING GRAY FOR GREEN  
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¶14. (C) A former general in the ROK Army, Lee Sang-hee concluded the meeting by saying that he had made many great American friends while he was still in uniform, but that now that he had put away his medals and was wearing a business suit he looked forward to building equally close relations with American civilian leaders. He said the work ethic of the new ROK administration was to start early and burn the midnight oil. Furthermore, he was particularly busy in the lead-up to the April 9 elections helping his president gain a working majority in the National Assembly. Nevertheless, Lee declared that he wanted to meet with the U.S. Ambassador on a regular basis so as to further broaden their bilateral discussion on the future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance and the betterment of the U.S.-ROK relations as a whole.

